POWER UP ACTION AGENDA
An initiative of the Women’s Rights and Empowerment Network
After more than two years since the emergence of COVID-19, a persistent labor shortage at the state and national level is the biggest challenge to our economic recovery and growth. The overall job openings rate is at a historic high, and it is even higher in industry sectors where women dominate.

Women have left the workforce in historic numbers over the last two years, prompting a lasting “she-cession” in South Carolina and across the nation. In fact, the pandemic only underlined an ongoing lack of support for women in the American workplace—illustrated by gaps in pay, lack of promotions, and harassment on the job; with unequal caregiving obligations at home; and without universal paid leave and affordable childcare to help them fulfill their dueling responsibilities. It is clear that neither South Carolina nor the US can solve the current labor shortage without addressing and improving the employment rates of women.

WREN created the **Power Up: Igniting a Gender-Equitable and Resilient Workforce for South Carolina initiative** to help business leaders, policymakers, and workers realize the full potential of women’s participation in the workforce.

The **Power Up: Action Agenda** includes a summary of the current status of female workforce participation in South Carolina[1], contributions from speakers and participants in the **Power Up: Igniting a Resilient, Gender-Equitable Workforce for South Carolina event** [2], and other state and national resources.

---

2. The Power Up: Igniting a Resilient, Gender-Equitable Workforce for South Carolina event took place on March 21, 2022, in Columbia, SC.
One of the most striking aspects of the pandemic-induced economic recession of 2020 is how its effects have fallen disproportionately on women.

In March 2020, COVID-19 triggered a mandatory government shutdown that, along with social distancing guidelines, significantly restricted the activity of many businesses. For instance, in the service sector, restaurant dining and travel were severely curtailed, resulting in accommodation & food service employment dropping by nearly half; the healthcare sector was forced to postpone many non-emergency surgeries and other services; and many support staff in the education sector experienced layoffs as schools went virtual. Notably, many hard-hit industries were those where female employment is more concentrated [4].

![Employment Recovery Among Selected SC Industries](image)

Even with a recovery well underway, the 2021 annual *Lean In: Women in the Workplace* [3] survey found that one in three women in corporate America said that they had considered downshifting their careers or leaving the workplace entirely in 2021. This figure compares to one in four the previous year, indicating that this problem is not getting better with time. The groups reporting the largest challenges were working mothers, women in senior management positions, and Black women.

---

3. There is currently 51.0 percent women in Accommodation & Food Service, 79.7 percent in Healthcare, and 71.5 percent in Education. (http://www.scwren.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Women-in-the-Workforce-2021.pdf

Notably, the overall US job openings rate is at its highest level in a decade. Even more striking, however, is how high the job openings rate is given current unemployment conditions. The unemployment rate in the United States was 5.2 percent as of August 2021. The job openings rate, however, was approximately 61 percent higher than it was the last time the unemployment rate in the United States was 5.2 percent (in July 2015). While the overall job openings rate is historically high across the board, it is even higher in industry sectors where women dominate [5].

IMPACT ON CAREGIVERS

Due to the 2020 shutdown of daycares and the movement towards virtual K-12 classrooms, the other factor undermining women’s employment was the degree to which they took on additional childcare responsibilities in their households.

Despite the eventual shift back to more normal learning environments for K-12 students in 2021, regular COVID-19 exposures in school continue to result in quarantines that require at-home childcare, which disproportionately impacts women’s participation in the workforce.

“When we talk about the evolving needs of the hospitality industry and what we’ve done for our employees, the first thing I think overall as the industry that we’ve tried to address is the need for pay equity. Because at the end of the day, if your team members cannot afford to come to work, that’s a huge problem.”

MAMIE BUSH
Director of Sales and Marketing
Hilton Garden Inn

WHERE DID THE WOMEN GO?

More precisely, why did the women go?

The challenges faced by women in returning to work is evidenced by the fact that unemployment rates increased more for women than for men between 2019 and 2020 [6]. While both younger and older female workers were hit especially hard [7], younger women were likely affected primarily by the downturn in the accommodation & food service sector; older women were likely in part-time jobs that were eliminated or they were looking for employment in less risky environments due to pandemic-related health concerns. Black women experienced the highest overall increase in unemployment, with rates rising from 3.2 percent in 2019 to 9.3 percent in 2020 [8].

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Reason for Not Working</th>
<th>S.C. Total</th>
<th>U.S. Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>47.3%</td>
<td>42.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other reason</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sick (not COVID-19) or disabled</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not report reason</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring for children not in school or daycare</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laid off or furloughed due to COVID-19</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring for someone or sick with COVID-19</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring for elderly person</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employer closed temporarily due to COVID-19</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employer went out of business due to COVID-19</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not have transportation to work</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not want to be employed</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concerned about getting or spreading COVID-19</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In response to a US Census Bureau survey of women not working in the Fall 2021, the primary reasons (after “Retired,” “Other,” and “Sick/Disabled”) that South Carolina respondents gave for their unemployment was caring for children, the sick, or the elderly; they were laid off; or their employer closed because of COVID-19. Only 1.5 percent reported not working because they “did not want to be employed.”

6. The unemployment rate for women in South Carolina increased by 4.4 percentage points compared to just 2.3 percentage points for men.
7. Younger women experienced unemployment rate increases of 8.4 percentage points and older women’s unemployment rates at an increase of 5.7 percentage points.
8. Unemployment rates by gender and race are not yet available at the state level.
Since most women in South Carolina are breadwinners for their families, their employment levels have a rippling impact across the state [9]. Finally, as South Carolina cannot solve its current labor shortage without improving the employment rates of women, employers across the state need to examine their efforts to ensure that all jobs provide benefits, flexibility, competitive pay, and security.

In the long run, a labor shortage also contributes to higher rates of inflation. Higher inflation, in turn, generally leads the Federal Reserve to raise interest rates to help bring inflation back down, but that can also reduce economic growth and slow the momentum of the economic recovery.

Given that women’s workforce participation has plummeted since the start of the pandemic, effectively addressing their needs is key to reversing this trend. Since most women in South Carolina are breadwinners for their families, their employment levels have a rippling impact across the state [9]. Finally, as South Carolina cannot solve its current labor shortage without improving the employment rates of women, employers across the state need to examine their efforts to ensure that all jobs provide benefits, flexibility, competitive pay, and security.

“IT HAS BEEN PROVEN THAT COMPANIES THAT MAKE A STRONG, MEANINGFUL COMMITMENT TO GENDER DIVERSITY TEND TO HAVE HIGHER LEVELS OF SUCCESS.” [10]

WHAT DO WORKERS NEED AND WANT?

A recent national study looked at what women most value in the workplace. For women who are planning to re-enter the workforce, good pay and health insurance are the top two desired benefits. As they consider future jobs, a majority of women report a living wage (87.8 percent) and health insurance (86.0 percent) to be “very important” or “important” benefits, followed by retirement benefits (84.7 percent) and job security (80.7 percent). Paid vacation (79.4 percent), paid sick time (77.3 percent), and paid family leave (76.6 percent) are also “very important” or “important” considerations. [11]

Companies who are not prioritizing women in their hiring and recruiting strategies are missing out. Not only can they double their talent pool, but they can also improve company performance. The benefits and workplace culture that women seek are beneficial to all employees, leading to more job satisfaction.

Women of Color Lose Ground at Every Step

The pandemic has disproportionately impacted Black women’s participation in the workforce. Industries that were hit the hardest by the pandemic such as retail, hospitality, tourism, and other service jobs employee majority women, especially Black women. These frontline jobs not only put Black women at greater risk of exposure to COVID-19, they also provided very little financial security since many of these industries closed due to the government shutdown.

Research indicates that women want flexibility as they consider future jobs.

- Over six in ten women (61.4 percent) surveyed consider control of their schedules to be “very important” or “important.”
- Despite more than a year of the pandemic, paid sick and family leave remains an elusive benefit for many working women. Over one-third of women (37.5 percent) employed full-time report they do not have paid sick leave—and 65.2 percent of full-time workers surveyed report they do not have paid family leave.
- Close to 70 percent of women report they do not have job security. Of women surveyed, just 31.6 percent felt that their current job offered security.

WORKPLACE STRATEGIES

To increase women’s participation and re-entry into the workforce, employers (especially those in sectors dominated by women) will need to ensure all jobs provide benefits, competitive pay, flexibility, an inclusive culture, and security.

The Take Action section of the Power Up: Action Agenda includes high level calls to action for employers with actionable steps. To learn more about ways you can improve your workplace policies and culture see WREN’s Power Up Your Workplace: A Playbook for Advancing Gender Equity.

These high-level actions can be applied across industries and company size. It is not an exhaustive list of options.

Collaborate with local governments to help meet the community’s childcare needs.

Provide shift workers advance scheduling so they can navigate caregiving needs.

Many caregivers must choose between working and caregiving, and when faced with this choice, women are more likely than men to stop working. When employers center the needs of caregivers, they acknowledge additional responsibilities that these individuals take on and how workplace policies can impact their ability to have work-life balance.

Employers can do this by verbalizing the value of caregiving, be intentional about researching and offering support for employees, and avoiding unnecessarily penalizing employees who are caregivers with outdated policies.

ACTIONABLE STEPS

Offer employees child care stipends.

"We saw our team members, especially our women team members, taking on more of the childcare burden... And those are the tough ones to replace, because you’re losing the training, the time, the talent. And when you lose them at such a high level, it makes a big difference to the firm."

CHARLES FLOWERS
Head of Investment Team
Abacus Planning Group
Gender and racial pay gaps make our workplaces less fair and productive and make our economy less competitive. Companies can and should take proactive steps to identify and close pay gaps.

**ACTIONABLE STEPS**

- **Conduct a pay audit to assess current company data on compensation.**
- **Develop clear and transparent pay structures that explain how compensation and promotion decisions are made, with a focus on business-related factors such as skill, effort, and responsibility.**
- **Provide implicit bias and interviewer training to HR and leadership.**

One way that I think we really have invested is by doing a comprehensive salary study. We’ve benchmarked every single job because what we know is that pay equity is real and that at varying levels of the organization, there can be equity issues. So, a male researcher in social science, is he paid equivalent to a female researcher and social science with an equivalent number of publications, courses, etc.? We did that study so we could ensure pay equity across the institution. It just takes a little commitment.
**Provide wellness stipends for employees.**

**ACTIONABLE STEPS**

- Provide employees paid parental leave.
- Ensure that new parents are supported when they return to work by providing adequate space and break time for lactation.

**TAKE ACTION**

**Provide Comprehensive Health Insurance**

Employers must make employees’ wellbeing and mental health a priority. Uncertainty in the workplace can lead to stress and anxiety which leads to burnout. Promoting work-life balance and self-care is key to maintaining a productive workforce.

- Provide healthcare coverage for all employees, and offer coverage for their partners and dependents.
- Include mental health coverage in insurance policies.

- Allow all employees to accrue paid sick leave.
- Provide paid family medical leave for employees at 100 percent of their wages.
At Benedict College, we don’t have meetings at 8:30 in the morning and we don’t have meetings at 3:00 in the afternoon. Why? Because that’s when women have to pick up their children, that’s when their cell phones start ringing. That’s when you get distracted, it’s pretty simple. We’re just as effective at a 1:00 meeting as we are at a 3:00 meeting, so why impose the additional stress? … I think we can solve so many of the problems if we’re just intuitive about people’s needs and recognizing what our workforce looks like.

Balancing work and family life is challenging, not only for women, but all employees. Working families need both flexibility and predictability in their work schedules. Many people have moved to working remotely with the ability to set their own schedules and take time off for family and caregiver responsibilities.

**ACTIONABLE STEPS**

- Allow employees to work from home or set their own work schedules.

- Provide hourly employees their work schedule well in advance so they can plan childcare.

- Offer shortened work weeks or other alternative schedule options.

**TAKE ACTION**

Allow for Flexibility in Work Schedules

The 2021 Women in Workplace [13] report says: “Work-life flexibility was the number one issue raised by employees in 2021, which became an even more important issue during the pandemic when schools and childcare centers were closing. Hourly workers benefit from advance scheduling so they are able to plan our childcare around their shifts.”

At Benedict College, we don’t have meetings at 8:30 in the morning and we don’t have meetings at 3:00 in the afternoon. Why? Because that’s when women have to pick up their children, that’s when their cell phones start ringing. That’s when you get distracted, it’s pretty simple. We’re just as effective at a 1:00 meeting as we are at a 3:00 meeting, so why impose the additional stress? … I think we can solve so many of the problems if we’re just intuitive about people’s needs and recognizing what our workforce looks like.

**DR. ROSLYN CLARK ARTIS**

President and CEO

Benedict College

---

We have to make sure our culture is inclusive. … Just as much as we are out there interviewing potential prospects for Milliken, they are definitely interviewing us. They want to know: ‘Does this company align with my beliefs? Are you an inclusive organization? Can I see myself here?’ If not, we have a problem. The interview basically stops there.

Employers must make employees’ wellbeing and mental health a priority. Uncertainty in the workplace can lead to stress and anxiety which leads to burnout. Promoting work-life balance and self-care is key to maintaining a productive workforce.

**TAKE ACTION**

**Create a Workplace Culture that is Inclusive and Respectful of All Employees**

**ACTIONABLE STEPS**

- **Invest in diversity, equity, and inclusion training for all employees.**
- **Solicit feedback from all employees on culture.**
- **Clearly communicate expectations.**
- **Establish clear nondiscrimination and harassment policies.**
Employees want clear pathways to leadership and advancement. These opportunities should be open to all employees and should be challenging yet attainable. If you want to maintain a talent pool within your company, then you must invest in women’s growth opportunities.

**ACTIONABLE STEPS**

- **Offer mentorship and sponsorship programs.**
- **Make job postings open to everyone.**
- **Invest in professional development.**
- **Include women in all levels of decision making.**

Follow us on social media @WRENNetwork or online at [www.scwren.org/powerup](http://www.scwren.org/powerup).
CONCLUSION

Increasing women’s participation in South Carolina’s labor force, particularly post-pandemic, is critical to addressing the labor shortage affecting the economic growth of our state and our nation. Employers have the opportunity to make real and meaningful change that will benefit their employees and the health of their businesses. Women have the opportunity to fulfill their professional aspirations, care for their families, and create a net gain in economic activity and recovery for our state.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to our initiative funders, Abacus Planning Group and Milliken for their financial contributions, without which this important work would not be possible. Additional thanks to our Power Up forum moderator, Dr. Nika White, as well as speakers Dr. Joseph Von Nessen and Beth Ruffin for their thought leadership. Finally, thank you to our forum participants Ricaye Harris representing Milliken & Company, Dr. Roslyn Clark Artis representing Benedict College, Charles Flowers representing Abacus Planning Group, and Mamie Bush representing Hilton Garden Inn Charleston Waterfront/Downtown at LBA Hospitality for their critical input to the discussion and the content of this resource guide.

RESOURCES

- Women in the Workplace (2022)
- Power Up Playbook to Advance Gender Equity
- Closing the Gap